Free-Wheeling Texas Governor John Connally Dies

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John B. Connally Jr., 76, the former Texas governor and U.S. Treasury secretary whose personal life and political career were as free-wheeling and outsized as his native Lone Star State, died of pulmonary fibrosis June 15 at Methodist Hospital in Houston. He had been admitted to the hospital May 17 with a breathing problem.

Although Gov. Connally's political career was intertwined with presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, both of whom he served as a close adviser, the public may always link him with a third—John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

Connally was riding in the presidential car in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, on a gloriously beautiful day and in the midst of a seemingly adoring crowd when gunfire erupted, slaying the youthful and charismatic president and severely wounding the dynamic and glamorous governor.

Upon learning of his death, President Clinton said Gov. Connally dedicated his life to his country and "to the principles in which he so passionately believed. He will be remembered fondly by his state and his country for the work that he did and the person that he was," Clinton said in a statement.

"I lost a real good friend," Gov. Ann Richards (D-Tex) said. "I'll miss his phone calls. I'll miss his extraordinary good humor. I'll miss his optimism and his encouragement."

Former President Reagan hailed Gov. Connally for "his sensible views and sound advice." Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Tex.) said he was "a man whose vision was long and who strode across eras with grace, dignity and iron determination." He added that Gov. Connally was always there, "standing tall, leading, making a difference, making history."

After the Dallas shooting, Gov. Connally recovered slowly and was left with scars on his back, chest, wrist and thigh. Returning to his official chores, he seemed somber and preoccupied. But he dramatically turned back a stiff challenge to his 1964 reelection, and by the time he stepped down as governor in 1969, he was one of the most powerful and widely admired governors in the state's history.

To the rest of the country, Gov. Connally seemed to personify Texas in a way that not even Lyndon

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Gov. Connally rides with the Kennedys on the day the president was killed.

Johnson could. He seemed to have Johnson's political acumen, his unmistakable auras of power and machismo, and a larger-than-life physical presence. But he also was suave and urbane, with a polish to his booming voice.

He seemed to move effortlessly, with an actor's poise and silver-maned good looks, between private life and public service. There were reports of his dominating presence at everything from corporate board meetings and international monetary conferences to political rallies along the Rio Grande and raucus gatherings with the Texas press. He could dress in Saville Row suits or boots and denim. He owned a cattle ranch straight out of central casting and had an eviable art collection.

Gov. Connally began his political career while still in law school, working in the congressional campaigns of Johnson, a young and raw New Dealer. Gov. Connally's political career seemed cemented to Johnson's until the Texan stepped down as president—from Johnson's razor-thin victory in the 1948 Democratic Senate primary to 1968, when Gov. Connally led the enormous Texas delegation at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Under President Nixon, he served as Treasury secretary in 1971 and 1972, during which time he largely directed the greatest revision of American monetary policy since the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference. He then directed a "Democrats for Nixon" campaign organization in 1972, before leaving the Democratic Party to become a Republican in 1973.

To the job of Treasury secretary, he brought common sense and political savvy. He began by assuring everyone that Nixon would not institute a wage-price board, not impose mandatory wage and price controls, not ask Congress for a tax reduction and not engage in further spending to stimulate a sluggish economy. They were all false.

In a few short months, he ran a series of delicate international negotiations, especially with Japan and France, that resulted in support for announcing that the United States would no longer freely convert dollars to gold and no longer peg the price of gold at $35 an ounce.

He also helped steer these and other packages through a surprisingly docile Congress and stepped down as Treasury secretary to what approached universal acclaim.

In 1974, Gov. Connally, prominently mentioned as a likely candidate to be named vice president after Spiro T. Agnew resigned, was indicted on charges that he had accepted a $10,000 bribe from the milk producers' lobby.

Many thought that a Nixon appointee in the era of Watergate could not get a fair jury trial in Washington. But a panel of 11 blacks and one white acquitted him after a brilliant defense by Washington lawyer Edward Bennett Williams. Among character witnesses were evangelist Billy Graham, former First Lady Lady Bird Johnson and the legendary Texas congresswoman, Barbara Jordan (D).

In 1976, after a tentative move for the presidency, Gov. Connally saw his name again linked with the vice presidency, when it became known that he had made President Gerald Ford's "short list" of candidates. Many thought that he was just the man to balance the GOP ticket. Instead, Ford chose Kansas Sen. Robert Dole as his running mate.

After the 1976 Republican defeat, Gov. Connally barnstormed for the Republican Party and seemed a likely 1980 Republican presidential candidate. But after gathering an enormous war chest, he managed to get only one delegate.

After that, he largely abandoned his political ambitions and threw himself into business deals. He and partner Ben Barnes, a former Texas House speaker and lieutentant governor, initiated oil and real estate ventures. Although initially wildly successful, they eventually lost everything. Gov. Connally was forced to stand aside while houses and belongings were auctioned off to repay his business debts, leaving him with one house and his ranch.

John Bowden Connally Jr. was born Feb. 27, 1917, in Floresville, Tex. The family was poor and large. His father had a one-bus busline (which he eventually sold to Greyhound) and bought a ranch, which he worked doggedly to improve.

John Jr. went off to the University of Texas, from which he received a law degree in 1941. At the university, he won oratorial contests, was president of the dramatic society and was elected student body president (his campaign manager was former Democratic National Commmittee chairman Robert Strauss).

During World War II Navy service, he worked in war plans at allied headquarters in Algiers, then went to the Pacific, where he was a fighter-director aboard the carriers Essex and Bennington and won the Bronze Star and Legion of Merit.

After the war, he became a campaign aide of increasing importance to Johnson. He also practiced law and was general manager of an Austin radio station. He had spent a short time as a House aide to Johnson in 1941, then returned to Washington as Johnson's senate administrative assistant in 1949.

But he quickly returned to Texas, determined to make money in business and law. He was an assistant to legendary Texas capitalist Sid W. Richardson. Among his tasks was lobbying Congress on oil issues. After Richardson died, he became conservator of the estate, and gathered fees that made him financially well off.

In 1960, he directed the Johnson presidential quest, including a bruising battle with the victorious Kennedy forces at the Los Angeles convention, where he leaked material to the media questioning Kennedy's physical ability—because of Addison's disease—to assume the presidency.

After the convention, he returned to Texas. To his surprise, he was named secretary of the Navy by Kennedy in 1961. As secretary, he became the largest purchaser of oil in the world—a fact not lost on his business friends in Texas.

He resigned to campaign for governor in 1962. Victorious, he became leader of the state party's conservative wing, just as Sen. Ralph Yarborough led its liberal wing. The November 1963 visit of Kennedy to Texas was partly to try and heal tensions between the two wings and also to raise some campaign funds.

Survivors include his wife, Idanell "Nellie" Brill, whom he married in 1940, and three children.